TOURS COUNTRY WITH M'GOVERN

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LOS ANGELES TIMES

'Average Joe' Gets Inside Look at Campaign

BY JULES WITCOVER
Times Staff Writer

ALBUQUERQUE—The name on the official press badge is Richard Johnson. The badge is just like all the rest, but it's wearer—a short, stocky gentleman of 43 with a Kiwanis look about him—is not quite the same as the other wisecracking, casual men behind all the other press badges on the McGovern campaign plane.

For all the tight security on Sen. George S. McGovern's plane, Richard Johnson is able to walk to the forward cabin, and sit down for a midflight chat with the Democratic presidential nominee.

A week ago, Johnson was a private citizen going about his business as credit manager for the National Steel Service Center in Evanston, Ill. Now, while the others wearing press badges busily hit typewriters, tinkered with TV cameras, played cards or engaged in the incessant banter that chases boredom in political campaigns, Richard Johnson watched with a mixture of awe and amusement, his politness and courtesy setting him apart.

He is the featured performer in a Public Broadcasting Service (educational TV) special scheduled a week from Wednesday night that will show how a high-powered presidential campaign looks to Mr. Average American when he is privileged to see it up close and from the inside.

For the last week, in the company of PBS commentator Robert MacNeil and producer Robert Lissit, Johnson had been flying from one end of the country to the other, and in-between, trying to make up his mind how to vote in November.

A lifelong Democrat, Johnson admitted readily that he was thinking seriously of voting for the first time for a Republican—President Nixon.

His wife, Mary Jane, is a Republican, Johnson said, and "every year since we've been married (18 years ago) our votes have canceled each other." reservations about where McGovern stands on key issues, especially on amnesty for draft dodgers and on the economy.

Johnson had an opportunity to ask the candidate directly about his concerns in an interivew Saturday in Albuquerque. He said he now was "uncommitted," and intended to use the next two months to make up his mind.

He acknowledged that the closeup exposure had affected his thinking. But Johnson was not succumbing to the lure of familiarity. He said of McGovern: "He's a very congenial man, very dedicated in his purpose with a religious background I like to see in anyone."

But Johnson said he thought McGovern would have to be more "dynamic" if he hoped to win.

The thing that really bothers me about him is that I think he's losing

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THE WEATHER

National Weather Service forecast: Cloudy with scattered sprinkles night and morning hours and partial clearing after noon today and Tuesday. Continued cool. High today and Tuesday, 73. High Sunday, 74; low, 64.

Complete weather information in Part 1, Page 22.

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votes because he's not as dynamic as he should be," Johnson said. "I don't think he's confident enough."

Of Mr. Nixon, he said: "He inherited a number of problems he's been wrestling with. I think he's done a commendable job in the four years he's been in there."

He questioned McGovern's plan to save $22 billion by closing tax loopholes: "Him and his $22 billion off the top. I don't know where it's going to come from."

The series of events that put Johnson on the McGovern campaign plane began last December. Lissit and MacNeil, as part of PBS' year-long effort to look at the 1972 campaign more from the viewpoint of the voter, struck on the idea of finding Mr. Average American and taking a good look at him and his concerns.

12 Families Picked

PBS researchers located an ideal middle-class community — Rolling Meadows, Ill., 21 miles northwest of Chicago—and selected about a dozen families. Lissit and MacNeil interviewed the families at length, narrowed the field to two and then to one.

The Johnson family—Richard, Mary Jane and their three daughters and a son—became the subject of a half-hour PBS show last Feb. 9 called "Man in the Middle."

They were filmed watching Sen. Edmund S. Muskie (D-Me.) making his TV announcement of candidacy. MacNeil also followed Johnson at home, at work, at church, discussing en route the Johnsons' problems in making ends meet on a family income of about $15,000 a year.

The conversations revealed Johnson to be a hard-working, modest, God-loving family man whose main ambition was to put his children through college and live in peace with his neighbors and himself.

In the February show, he expressed about the same sentiments on possibly voting for President Nixon that he does today, and now admits he never expected McGovern to be in the picture this fall.

"The man I would have voted for as a Democrat didn't choose to run," Johnson said, referring to Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.).

All through what doubtless has been the most unusual week in Johnson's life, he has called Mrs. Johnson each night to convey his impresions—while PBS cameras and microphones have watched and listened.

"The first night," reported MacNeil, "he told her: 'This is pretty ritzy.'" The accommodations on the plane have been first class and so have most of the overnight hotel stops.

The trip, Johnson said, has given him a much better understanding of a presidential campaign. He admitted he had some biases about the press before this experience but said he appreciated the role of the press more now.

"The thing that really impresses me about the press is the beehive of activity — running to the phones, the typewriters always going, the great footage of film that is never used—that is the kind of thing that the average Joe doesn't understand.

"And how they handle all the baggage and all that—the average Joe has no idea of what goes into a campaign.

Johnson — himself an average Joe — said he comes away from the experience more interested, more respectful and more sympathetic. But he has learned also that the press and TV are very selective in what they show and write about.

From now until Nov. 7, he said, he will pay much more attention to the presidential campaign—and to McGovern — than he would have otherwise.

Question Posed

At the close of Johnson's interview with the Democratic nominee Saturday, according to MacNeil, McGovern remarked to his visitor: "Are we losing you?" — meaning, was Johnson leaving the traveling party?

"Well, Senator," Johnson replied, thinking the candidate was inquiring about his vote, "I'm uncommitted."

McGovern's failure to make an outright convert of this one lifelong Democrat from middle America, MacNeil noted, raised a serious question for the McGovern campaign.

"If the man who sees him at this range for a full week, likes him and still has doubts," he asked, "how about all those middle Americans McGovern has to win over who don't have this advantage?"

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